The Reflector.

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[Continued from Last Week.]

DUNRAVEN RANCH

A Story of American Frontier Life.

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"Let me help you," eagerly said Perry. "That, at least, is more in my line." And somehow their fingers touched as he twisted at the stubborn knot. She drew her hand away then, but it was gently, not abruptly done, and he found time to note that, too, and bless her for it.

"I hate to seem ungracious, you know, after all that's happened," said Mr. Ewen, "but I fear 'twill vex him awfully if he should find you in here when he comes to. He has had these attacks for some time past, and I think he's coming through all right. See!"

Old Maitland was certainly beginning to open his eyes again and look vacantly around him.

"Better leave him to Miss Gladys," said the overseer, touching the young fellow on the shoulder. Perry looked into her face to read her wishes before he would obey. A flush was rising to her cheek, a cloud settling about her young eyes, but she turned, after a quick glance at her father.

"I cannot thank you enough—now," she said, hesitatingly. "Perhaps Mr. Ewen is right. You—you deserve to be told the story of his trouble, you have been so kind. Some day you shall understand—soon—and not think unkindly of us."

"Indeed I do not now," he protested.

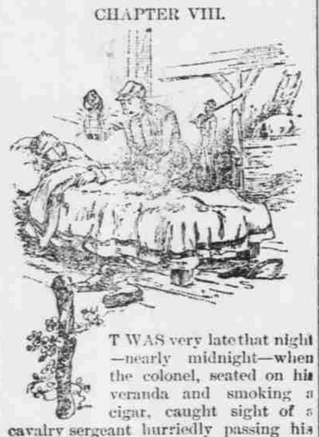
"And—whom are we to thank?—your name, I mean?" she timidly asked.

"I am Mr. Perry, of the —th cavalry. We have only come to Fort Rossiter this month."

"And I am Miss Maitland. Some day I can thank you." And she held forth her long, slim hand. He took it very reverently and bowed over it, courtier like, longing to say something that might fit the occasion; but before his scattered senses could come to him there was another quick step at the veranda, and a voice that sounded strangely familiar startled his ears:

"Gladys! What has happened?" And there, striding to the sofa with the steps of one assured of welcome and thoroughly at home in those strange precincts, came Dr. Quin.

CHAPTER VIII.



T WAS very late that night—nearly midnight—when the colonel, seated on his veranda and smoking a cigar, caught sight of a cavalry sergeant hurriedly passing his front gate. The main searching parties had long since come home, unsuccessful; Lieut. Perry had returned and made report that the people at Dunraven denied having seen or heard anything of Gwynne, that both proprietor and manager had treated his visit as an affront, and that he had had much difficulty in preventing a fracas between his men and a gang of rough fellows employed at the ranch, that Mr. Maitland had fallen back in a swoon, and that he had left him to the care of Dr. Quin, who arrived soon after the occurrence.

The colonel had been greatly interested and somewhat excited over the details of Perry's adventure as that young gentleman finally gave them, for at first he was apparently averse to saying much about it. Little by little, however, all his conversation with Maitland and Ewen was drawn out, and the particulars of his hostile reception. The colonel agreed with him that there was grave reason to suspect some of the ranch people of knowing far more of Sergt. Gwynne's disappearance than they would tell; and finally, seeing Perry's indisposition to talk further, and noting his preoccupation and apparent depression of spirits, he concluded that between fatigue and rasped nerves the young fellow would be glad to go to bed, so he said, kindly:

"Well, I won't keep you, Perry, you're tired out. I'll sit up and see the doctor when he gets back and have a talk with him, then decide what steps we will take in the morning. I'll send a party down the valley at daybreak, anyway. May I offer you some whisky or a bottle of beer?"

"Thank you, colonel, I believe not tonight. A bath and a nap will set me all right, and I'll be ready to start out first thing in the morning. Good night, sir."

But Col. Brainard could not go to sleep. The garrison had "turned in," all except the guard and Capt. Stryker. That officer had returned an hour after dark, and, getting a fresh horse, had started out again, going down the south side of the Monee to search the timber with lanterns, the Cheyenne scouts having reported that Gwynne's horse had come up that way. He had been missed by Mr. Perry, who galloped up the trail to catch the platoon before it reached the post, and the colonel, now that he had heard the lieutenant's story, was impatiently awaiting his return. Up to within a few minutes of midnight, however, neither Stryker nor the doctor had come; dim lights were burning in both their quarters and at the guard house. Everywhere else the garrison seemed shrouded in darkness. Catching sight of the yellow chevrons as they flitted through the flood of light that poured from his open doorway, the colonel instantly divined that this must be a sergeant of Stryker's troop going in search of his captain, and promptly hailed him:

"What is it, sergeant? Any news?"

"Yes, sir," answered the soldier, halting short. "Sergt. Gwynne's come back. I was going to the captain's to report."

"How did he get back? Isn't he injured?"

"He says he's had a fall, sir, and has been badly shaken up, but he walked in."

"Why, that's singular! Did he see none of the searching parties?—see none of their lights?"

"I can't make out, sir. He's a little queer—doesn't want to talk, sir. He asked if his horse got in all right, and went and examined the scratches, and seemed troubled about them: but he doesn't say anything."

"Has he gone to the hospital?"

"No, sir; he'll sleep in his usual bunk at the stables to-night. He is only bruised and sore, he says. His face is cut and scratched and bound up in his handkerchief."

"Very well," said the colonel, after a moment's thought. "The captain will look into the matter when he gets back. You take your horse and ride down the south side of the valley and find the Cheyenne scouts. Capt. Stryker is with them. Tell him the sergeant is home, safe."

"Very well, sir." And the trooper saluted, faced about, and disappeared in the darkness; while the colonel arose, and, puffing thoughtfully at his cigar, began pacing slowly up and down the piazza. He wished Stryker were home; he wished Capt. Lawrence were officer of the day, and, so, liable to come out of his quarters again: he had heard just enough about that odd English ranch to make him feel disturbed and ill at ease. There had evidently been hostility between his predecessor and the proprietor of Dunraven, and very probably there had been bad blood between the men of the Eleventh cavalry and the employes of the ranch: else why should there have been so unprovoked an assault upon the lieutenant this night! Then there were other things that gave him disquiet. Several officers had gathered upon the piazza during the early evening: they were mainly of his own regiment, but Capt. Belknap and two of the infantry subalterns were there; Lawrence did not come. Of course the talk was about the incident of the evening, and, later, the rumors about Dunraven. All this was new to the cavalrymen: they had heard, as yet, nothing at all and were not a little taken aback by the evident embarrassment and ominous silence of the three infantrymen, when the colonel turned suddenly on Belknap with the question—

"By the way, captain, I had no time to ask Lawrence, and it really did not occur to me until after he had gone, but—what did he mean by saying that Dr. Quin could tell us something about the people at Dunraven?"

Belknap turned red and looked uncomfortably at his two comrades, as though appealing to them for aid. The younger officers, however, would say nothing at all, and the colonel promptly saw that he had stumbled on some piece on garrison gossip.

"Never mind," he said, with a kindly laugh. "I don't want to drag any stories out by the roots. The doctor can doubtless explain it all in good season."

"Well, Col. Brainard," answered Belknap, bulkily, "to tell the truth, I really don't know anything about it, and I don't know any one who does, though I have heard some woman talk about the post. The relations between Dr. Quin and some of the officers of the Eleventh were rather strained, and he is a somewhat reserved and secretive man. The stories were set afloat here last fall, and we had to hear more or less of them until the Eleventh went away this spring. We know only that Dr. Quin has been to Dunraven and the rest of us haven't. Possibly some of the Eleventh were piqued because they had no such luck, or perhaps their ladies did not like it because Quin wouldn't tell them anything about what he saw. At all events, he refused to talk on the subject at all, and allowed people to draw their own conclusions."

"He probably told his post commander," suggested Lieut. Farnham, who, as acting adjutant of the post and an aspirant for the adjutancy of the regiment, thought it a good opportunity of putting in a word as indicative of what he considered the bounden duty of an officer under like circumstances.

"Well, no, I fancy not," replied Belknap. "About the only thing we really do know is that, in a somewhat angry interview last fall, Col. Stratton forbade Dr. Quin's leaving the post or going to Dunraven without his express permission. I happened to be in the office at the time."

"Was it before or after that he was said to go there so often?" asked Farnham.

"Well, both," answered Belknap, reluctantly. "But understand me, Mr. Farnham, I know nothing whatever of the matter."

"I should not suppose that Col. Stratton would care to restrict his post surgeon from going thither if they needed his professional services," said Col. Brainard, pleasantly.

"That was the point at issue, apparently," answered Belknap. "Col. Stratton said that it was not on professional grounds that he went, and thereby seemed to widen the breach between them. Dr. Quin would not speak to the colonel after that, except when duty required it."

The conversation changed here, and little more was said; but Col. Brainard could not help thinking of a matter that he carefully kept to himself. It was not his custom to require his officers to ask permission to leave the garrison for a ride or hunt when they were to be absent from no duty, and only by day. Here it was midnight, as he thought it over, and the doctor had not returned, neither had he mentioned his desire to ride away, although he had been with the colonel well nigh an hour before parade. True, he had sent the doctor word to go and join Lieut. Perry at the gate of Dunraven, and that would account for his detention; but he knew that the surgeon was several miles away from his post and his patients at the moment that message was sent.

Meantime, Perry, too, was having a communion with himself, and finding it all vexation of spirit. All the way home the memory of that sweet English face was uppermost in his thoughts. He had been startled at the sight of a young and fair woman at Dunraven; he had felt a sense of inexplicable rejoicing when she said to him, "I am Miss Maitland;" it would have jarsed him to know that she was wife; he was happy, kneeling by the side of the beautiful girl he had never seen before that evening, and delighted that he could be of service to her. All this was retrospect worth indulging; but then arose the black shadow on his vision. How came Dr. Quin striding in there as though "native and to the manner born?"—how came he to call her "Gladys?" Perry had been pondering over this matter for full half an hour on the homeward ride before he bethought him of Mrs. Lawrence's remarks about the signal lights. One thing led to another in his recollection of her talk. The doctor answered the signals, no one else; the doctor and no one else was received at Dunraven; the doctor had declined to answer any questions about the people at the ranch; had been silent and mysterious, yet frequent in his visits. And then, more than all, what was that Mrs. Lawrence said or intimated that Mrs. Quin, "such a lovely woman, too," had taken her children and left him early that spring, and all on account of somebody or something connected with Dunraven Ranch? Good heavens! It could not be "Gladys." And yet——

Instead of taking a bath and going to bed, Mr. Perry poked his head into Parke's bachelor chamber as he reached the little cottage they shared in common. No Gladys disturbed the junior's dreams, apparently, for he was breathing regularly, sleeping the sleep of the just; and so, finding no one to talk to and being in no mood to go to bed at an hour so comparatively early when he had so much to think about, Perry filled a pipe and perched himself in a big chair by the window seat, intending to think it all over again. He was beginning to hate that doctor; he would have chafed at the idea of any bachelor's being before him in an acquaintance with Gladys Maitland, but a married man knowing her so well as to make his wife jealous and himself indifferent to that fact—knowing her so well as to drive "such a lovely woman, too," into taking her children and quitting the marital roof—that was too much of a bad thing, and Perry was sore discomfited. He got up, impatient and restless, passed out to the little piazza in front of his quarters, and began pacing up and down, the glow from his corncob pipe making a fiery trail in the darkness. He would have been glad to go back to the colonel and keep watch with him; but there was one thing connected with his visit to Dunraven that he could not bear to speak of, especially as those words of Mrs. Lawrence recurred again and again to his memory. He had not said one word—he did not want to tell—of Gladys Maitland.

And so it happened that Perry, too, was awake and astir when the footsteps of the cavalry sergeant were heard on their way to Capt. Stryker's quarters. Listening, he noted that the soldier had halted at the colonel's, held a brief conversation with that officer, and then turned back across the parade. Instantly divining that news had come of Sergt. Gwynne, Perry seized his forage cap and hurried in pursuit. He overtook the trooper just beyond the guard house and went with him eagerly to the stables. A moment more, and he was bending over a soldier's bedside in a little room adjoining the forage shed and by the light of a dim stable lantern looking down into the bruised and battered features of the noncommissioned officer, whom he had pronounced of all others at Rossiter the most respected and highly thought of by the cavalry garrison.

"Sergeant, I'm very sorry to see you so badly mauled," said Perry. "How on earth did it happen?"

Gwynne turned his head painfully until the one unbandaged eye could look about and see that none of the stable guard were within hearing, then back again and up into the sympathetic face of his young superior.

"Lieutenant, I must tell you and the captain; and yet it is a matter I profoundly wish to keep as secret as possible—the story of my day's adventure, I mean."

"You need not tell me at all if you do not wish to," said Perry; "though I think it is due to yourself that the captain should know how it was you were gone all day and that your horse and you both came back in such condition."

"I understand, sir, fully," answered Gwynne, respectfully. "I shall tell the captain the whole story, if he so desire. Meantime, I can only ask that no one else be told. If the men in the troop had an inkling of the true story there would be endless trouble; and so I have tried to account for it by saying my horse and I had an ugly fall while running a coyote through the timber. We did see a coyote, down near the ranch on the Monee, and I did have an ugly fall: I was set upon by three of those ranchmen and badly handled."

"Yes, damn them!" said Perry, excitedly and wrathfully. "I've had an experience with them myself to-night, while we were searching for you."

"So much the more reason, sir, why my mishap should not be told among the men. The two affairs combined would be more than they would stand. There are enough Irishmen here in our troop alone to go down and wipe that ranch out of existence; and I fear trouble as it stands."

"Whether there will be trouble or not will depend very much on the future conduct of the proprietor and manager down there. Of course we cannot tolerate for an instant the idea of their maintaining a gang of ruffians there who are allowed to assault officers or men who happen to ride around that neighborhood. You were not inside their limits, were you?"

"Yes, sir," said the sergeant, painfully, "I was; I had tied my horse outside and ventured in to get a nearer look at the buildings."

"What time did it happen?"

"This morning, sir; not more than an hour and a half after you spoke to me in the valley."

"Indeed! Then you must have lain there all day! Why, Gwynne, this will never do. I'll go and get the surgeon and have him look you all over. You must have been brutally mauled, and must be utterly exhausted."

"Don't go, sir," said the sergeant, eagerly stretching forth a hand. "It—it isn't as you think, sir. I have been kindly cared for. They're not all ruffians down there, and the men who assaulted me will be fully punished. I've been quite as well nursed and fed and brandied and bandaged as though I'd been carried right to hospital. Indeed, I don't need anything but rest. I'll be all right in a day."

"But I think Dr. Quin ought to see you and satisfy us you are not injured."

"Be satisfied, sir. The doctor has seen me."

"Why, but how?—where? He was here all day, and only went away at sunset. He joined me at Dunraven about 9 o'clock, and hadn't returned when I came in. Did he find you and bring you back?"

Gwynne hesitated painfully again:

"The doctor saw me this evening—down near where I was hurt; but I got back here without his help, sir. Lieutenant," said the soldier, suddenly, "there are one or two things connected with this day's work that I cannot tell. Come what may, I must not speak of them, even to the captain."

Perry was silent a moment. Then he kindly answered:

"I do not think any one here will press you to tell what you consider it might be ungrateful or dishonorable in you to reveal. I will do what I can to see that your wishes are respected. And now, if you are sure I can do nothing for you, good night, sergeant." And the young officer held out his hand.

"Good night, sir," answered Gwynne. He hesitated one moment. It was the first time since he entered the service, nearly five years before, that an officer offered him his hand. It was a new and strange sensation. It might not be "good discipline" to take advantage of it, but there were other reasons. Gwynne looked up in the frank blue eyes of his lieutenant and read something there that told a new story. Out came a hand as slender and shapely as that of the young officer, and the two were silently and firmly clasped.

"How can I question him?" said Perry to himself as he walked slowly homeward. "Is there not something I am holding back?—something I cannot speak of? By Jupiter! can his be the same reason?"

[To be continued.]